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AUTHOR Abbey, Brian; Ashenden, Dean
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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a Marxist reply to a philosophical discourse on the role of the "progressive" teacher in the education of children. The position under attack is that teachers themselves, no matter how progressive, are a part of the social hierarchy and impose middle class values on children, thus perpetuating the system. They are, in brief, one of the "enemy" to the true radical. The argument is made that it is desirable to join progressive teachers with marxists through active trade unions, using the best potential of all to change the system. An association of the practice-oriented progressive teacher with the theory-oriented socialist will help resolve the gap of understanding between the two and aid in the development of a socialist, revolutionary, educational praxis. (JD)

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RACHEL'S RADICAL GOSPEL:

A MARXIST CRITIQUE

Brian Abbey

Dean Ashenden

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Australia.]

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Rachel Sharp (Red Dossier 1) does something which is done by very few education analysts or activists. Sharp shows that there are ties that bind our classroom activities to the larger social world. Most education studies split this unity into parts, then regard the part as being the whole.

Some of the subjects that make up education studies focus on "the individual", others on "society". The first group is concerned with the way individuals are formed and how they experience the world, while the rest of the social world is treated as a mere "background" or "context". The second group of subjects do just the reverse. They completely ignore the formation of consciousness and treat individuals as more or less passive victims of "social forces" of various sorts ("political events", "trends in the economy" etc.). Each side treats the terrain of the others as un-problematic and more or less irrelevant to their concerns. In other words, there is a "gap" in our understanding of what happens in the social world in general, and in the schools in particular. It's as though lives are lived outside society; or as though a "social structure" is devoid of people and their experience.[1]

This "gap" in our understanding has important consequences for our work in education. Most obviously it has tended to divide us into two separate and sometimes hostile groups. On the one hand are those who want to "do something", to make visible and immediate changes, and concern themselves with the immediately experienced environment. On the other hand are those who see that kind of work as myopic or idealistic, as ignoring the fact that the schools are "a part of the system". This group wants to work at the level of "the system", to change "society as a whole".

Sharp avoids that kind of thinking, and because she sees the connections between apparently separate parts of the social world, her analysis is compelling and her argument important, and both deserve careful inspection. We propose to do that by briefly summarising her analysis of progressive pedagogy, looking at some of the weaknesses in that analysis, and then shifting our attention to Sharp's political prescriptions and the method which produced them.

* *

Sharp (and her co-worker Tony Green [2]) spent a year in a progressive state primary school in England, trying to find out "whether and in what way the child centred school produced different outcomes" (13)[3]. They looked at "the ongoing process of reality construction in the day to day interactions in the classroom". (13) That is, they counted as basic the way people felt about and treated each other - but they were "critical of the view that a full explanation of the processes observed could be gained solely by examining the system of meanings within the classroom context". (13)

They found that in an apparently free and intimate environment, children were in fact sorted into hierarchies and treated in quite different and unequal ways. At first glance this contradiction seemed to grow out of woolly thinking or bad attitudes or inadequate training of the teachers. But Sharp and Green reject such explanations as ignoring the "contradictions, conflicting pressures and constraints on teachers", (13) the "wider context of constraints which structure the teacher's meanings and actions". (14)

How do these demands make themselves felt in the classroom? Well, teachers can't do everything, and so they have to pick and choose. They do that in a way which reflects the "contradictions, conflicting pressures and constraints". Varying amounts and kinds of teacher's attention sort kids into three groups: the normals, the abnormals, and the elite. The teacher thus contributes to the reproduction of the inequalities of the world around the school.

We can describe this approach as a variety of <u>situational determinism</u>. It's a particularly effective weapon against the progressives, with their undue reliance on good intentions, sincerity, lofty ideals, and the like, and their ignorance or carelessness of objective factors in the situation. But situational determinism is not the same as marxism. Showing that the teacher's situation helps form his or her ideals, and the ways chosen to realise them, is one thing. And well worth doing, too. But a great many people who have no love for marxism as a method and movement will go this far. The marxian analysis must go further to show how "the teacher's situation" is determined, ultimately, by the tortuous and contradictory process of capital accumulation and re-production. Rachel does not attempt this, and seems not to have thought of it when she was writing the works we've examined.

Now let us say straight away that there is no simple way of doing what we claim must be done. It's not a case of walking into the classroom and reading off its capitalist traits or looking for a capitalist system in miniature. The crucial thing is the approach or method of analysis. "Capitalism" is not a fixed essence, it can't be boiled down to a basic feature or requirement or imperative or whatever. "Capitalism" is a particular and complex social form at a given moment or stage of development. In other words, to know what "capitalism" is, you must approach it as material and historical phenomenon. That is the marxist method, and Sharp's isn't - as her political prescriptions make clear.

* *

What should teachers do? Sharp's answer is clear and iconoclastic. The problem with most teachers (she argues) is that they have "middle-class ideas". Similarly, the trouble with the traditional school is "the nature of the knowledge being transmitted to the children". (18) What's more, "capitalism is held together by a complex and systematic set of ideas". (19) Hence the political proposal: we should build up an "equally systematic world view". (19) This will enable the radical teacher to make his or her contribution "within the confines of many subjects which are currently taught in the schools". (19) We must "follow Gramsci" in "habits of hard work, self denial, study and personal asceticism". (19) The radical teacher must produce the few who have "the cognitive wherewithal and the will" to overcome capitalism on behalf of the many. (19)

But the trouble is that ideas don't work like that. Sharp thinks of ideas as independent, portable commodities which are produced by intellectuals (teachers, revolutionaries) and consumed by non-intellectuals (students, the masses). Here Gramsci has a lesson for us, though not the one Sharp suggests. Gramsci argues that "all men are intellectuals, but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals". "Each man", he continues, "carries on some form of intellectual activity ... and therefore contributes to sustain a conception of the world or to modify it, that is, to bring into being new modes of thought".[4]

So first, Gramsci reminds us that all individuals are active in the constitution of their ideas - a reminder which Sharp, with her interactionist perspective, should not have needed. But more, Gramsci points out the relationship between ideas and social practice. He emphasises the point in this way: "There is no human activity from

which every form of intellectual participation can be excluded: *homo faber* cannot be separated from *homo sapiens*".[5] That is, ideas and activity constitute and are constituted by a dialectic, mutually produced and producing, inseparable. We suspect that Sharp's idea of what ideas are doesn't take sufficient account of that relationship. That would explain her dangerously lop-sided emphasis on school knowledge (in the limited sense) and her attachment to the simplistic and misleading contention that capitalism is founded on / glued together by ideas.

Of course capitalism has made a huge effort to disrupt the interaction of thought and activity. Under the division of mental and manual labour "hand and brain become not just separated, but divided and hostile".[6] The working-class is allocated the manual labour, and this is one of the ways in which the bourgeois class shapes the social order and working-class experience of it. The bourgeoisie also dominates the production and distribution of ideas, through its control of the media, the schools and so on. It attempts to - but never succeeds in - obliterating the working-class conception of the world. This leads the working-class to experience what Gramsci terms a "contrast between thought and action".[7] These features of life in the working-class may be summed up as a truncation and distortion of conscious, developing *praxis*. It is one of the main aspects of bourgeois hegemony (Gramsci), and one of the deepest of the "hidden injuries of class" (Sennett and Cobb).[8]

If this analysis is correct, we should be very suspicious of the notion that we can usher in socialism by distributing correct ideas (as Sharp advocates). To do so would be to operate very much within a bourgeois mode. It is a prescription for a "practiceless knowledge" and a "knowledgeless practice", for non-reflective practice, activity without subjectivity. It would reinforce the division of mental and non-mental labour. It further implies a separation of the problem of ending capitalism from the problem of building socialism. There are obvious consequences for the shape of a revolutionary movement and post-capitalist society.

But there is a further difficulty: what are these "correct" ideas anyway? No-one can answer the question, except at a very abstract or general level. Ideas are only correct as worked out in practice, at a particular time in relation to a particular task or problem. This brings us to a second defining characteristic of Sharp's method - the absence of an <u>historical</u> perspective.

This absence is clear in the way Sharp sets up the progressives for analysis. She takes two short steps. First she lights upon their ideas, and then, implicitly, extracts the "essence" of those ideas. We've already suggested that this is an idealist method; but it's also a-historical. It "freezes" or "fixes" the progressives, regards them as a static, uncomplicated object. Actually, of course, what the progressives "are" is determined by the relations between them and other social groups. Those relations are neither simple nor immutable. They contain ambiguities and contradictions, and they change over time. And so the progressives change. The importance of this point is clear when we consider a policy towards the progressives.

* *

Revolutionaries are at this moment facing a concrete question: what should we do about the attack on progressive schools and teachers? Sharp's answer to the question is clear enough: the progressives (she treats them as a homogeneous bloc) have the wrong ideas, an incorrect analysis. Being seriously mistaken in this way they are to be swept aside with contempt and hostility, rejected as worthless. In essence they are part of the enemy. The similarity to maoïst simplifications about trade unions ("part of the capitalist state"), or third international analysis of social democracy (social fascists) is striking, and so would be the results.

Against this we would argue that the progressive ideas and practice have a certain distance from those which dominate our schools, chiefly in thinking that what people feel is important, and in seeing that feelings can't change if some social relations don't. Sharp is, of course, quite right when she points out that that's not enough for an oppositional practice, and that in consequence the progressive may easily and unwittingly be drawn into bourgeois orthodoxy. But the real question for us is: what are the conditions of the progressive moving in the other direction? In the present situation the answer is clear: by entering with socialist militants into arrangements for mutual defence, mainly in and through the teachers' unions.

This is necessary for the survival of both sides. Anyone who thinks that progressive teachers will be rolled while marxists remain untouched - or vice versa - is making a big mistake. But mutual defence is not only necessary. It's desirable, and has the potential of developing all concerned. The trade union consciousness of teachers

unions would be extended by the progressive's sensitivity to the direct or immediate impact of our work on our students and ourselves. Some of the more "system minded" marxists might learn from this too. The limitations and misconceptions which make progressives so defenceless could be rapidly dispelled, first by exposure to the trade union consciousness of the teachers organisations and even more by active association with marxist militants (not at all the same thing, by the way, as exposure to the "correct line").

But there is a more fundamental question. We began our remarks by pointing to a "gap" in most understandings of the relations between personal experience and social structure, and to the ways in which this was linked with shortcomings in the radical education movement. The tension between progressive and marxist teachers is very much a case in point. An association of the practice-oriented progressive and the theory-oriented socialists would help to resolve the "gap" in our understanding in and through the development of a socialist, revolutionary educational praxis.

FOOTNOTES:

1. We develop this point more fully in "Society and Experience, with particular reference to class and education", a paper given at the Class Analysis Conference, Sydney 1976. Copies are available from us (Sturt CAE, Bedford Park, 5042) or from Education Subscription Service. Eli Zaretsky comments lucidly on the same question in his Capitalism, the family and personal life, London 1976 (see especially the first two chapters).

2. In these comments we are drawing on the book Education and Social Control: a study in progressive primary education (London 1975), which Sharp co-authored with Anthony Green, and on Rachel's paper in Red Dossier 1 (originally given to the radical teachers conference in Sydney last year).

3. The numbers in brackets here and below are page references to Red Dossier 1.

4. Antonio Gramsci, "The Intellectuals", in Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (eds. & trans.) Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci, London 1971, p.9.

5. loc.cit.

6. Harry Braverman Labor and Monopoly Capitalism: the Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century, New York 1974, p.125.

7. Antonio Gramsci, "The Study of Philosophy", in Hoare and Nowell Smith, op.cit., p.326.

8. Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, The Hidden Injuries of Class, New York 1972.

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